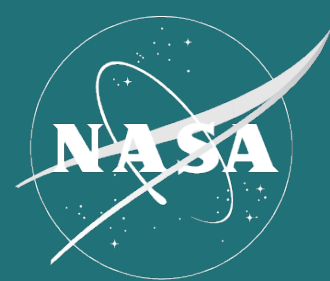


# STENNIS SPACE CENTER

## *Profiles in Leadership*



It only took one night and some grainy black-and-white images to set Stennis Space Center Director Rick Gilbrech on his path to a NASA career. Growing up, Gilbrech dreamed of being the Dallas Cowboys quarterback or a fighter pilot. When he was seven years old, however, his father allowed him to stay up late to watch the Apollo 11 mission to the Moon. As Neil Armstrong became the first human to step foot on the lunar surface, Gilbrech's career dreams immediately changed. He wanted to be an astronaut. Although the ultimate goal was not realized, Gilbrech never wavered from his commitment to work for NASA. He completed graduate studies in aeronautics and went to work at Stennis right out of school, landing a position in test technology in 1991. He served in a variety of roles in subsequent years, including an initial stint as director of the south Mississippi center in 2006-7. After leaving Stennis to work as associate administrator for NASA's Exploration Systems Mission Directorate, he returned to the Stennis front office. He began his second term as Stennis director in 2012, most recently leading the center through the historic Green Run testing of NASA's Space Launch System core stage in the midst of a global pandemic and one of the busiest hurricane seasons in Gulf Coast history. Gilbrech counts the test series, and the opportunity to lead such an outstanding workforce and assist others in becoming agency leaders, as his proudest career achievements.

### What will you remember most about your NASA career?

What I will remember most are the great people I had the privilege to work with through the years.

### How do you define leadership?

Management consultant Peter Drucker says it well: "Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right thing." Maintain your integrity in all things, and know that there are no natural born leaders. It is a skill just like any other that requires an investment of time and training to grow. Great leaders I have imitated are trustworthy, have even-keeled personalities, with a calming influence during rocky times, and are selfless in seeking the greater good of the organization and fellow employees. The really great ones evoke a sense of genuine interest and compassion for their colleagues, plus have a good sense of humor.

### What are some important lessons you have learned?

Things are never as good or as bad as they seem on first report so do not ride the emotional rollercoaster by immediate reaction to early news.

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Speak truth to power (good or bad news), so leaders can make good decisions based on accurate information.

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Emulate leaders you admire.

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Surround yourself with highly qualified, loyal people.

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Learn to effectively delegate as your span of control increases.

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As a leader, learn to assess your workers' capabilities so you can delegate at the appropriate level of autonomy.

### Looking ahead, what are you most excited about for NASA and Stennis?

I am most excited about preparing our B-2 Test Stand for testing the Exploration Upper Stage that will fly on NASA's Space Launch System, about seeing the first Artemis I launch, and about having American astronauts step back onto the Moon this decade.



**Dr. Richard Gilbrech**  
**Director**  
**Stennis Space Center**

### What advice would you give to an aspiring leader?

Pat Riley (former coach of Los Angeles Lakers) said luck is where preparation and opportunity meet. Set five-year goals for your career and seek training or work experiences that will help you attain those goals. Concentrate on doing your best at what is in front of you rather than focus on promotions – good things will follow. How you handle disappointment at work is more important than how you handle success, and senior leaders watch both to gauge your maturity and resilience. Do not be afraid to take risks early in your career, and learn from your failures/mistakes without dwelling or obsessing on them.

### How would you advise young people pursuing a NASA career?

My favorite mentor, former Stennis Director Roy Estess, told me early in my career that the hardest job I will ever have is supervising people. No two people are alike; every individual requires a unique approach, and people are never as predictable as a math equation. To overcome, I sought supervisory training and consulted leaders who I had seen exhibit good supervisory skills, and I also was quick to learn from my mistakes.